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VIETNAM

The North Vietnamese divisions are getting closer to Saigon. In two critical areas--Xuan Loc to the east and Tan An to the southwest--the communists have kept the pressure on government defenses while sending additional forces past to new positions between the cities and Saigon. While the South Vietnamese have been extracting the remaining defenders from Xuan Loc, for example, North Vietnamese regiments have driven toward Bien Hoa city. This city's main defense units--two brigades of marines which escaped from Da Nang--are newly regrouped and suffering from very poor discipline. They are not expected to stand and fight. The nearby Long Binh supply depot contains about 60 percent of all government munitions. The loss of Bien Hoa city and the air base and supply depot is likely to lead to the rapid collapse of other government forces.

To the northwest, remaining South Vietnamese 25th Division battalions have been pulled out of Tay Ninh city to blocking positions closer to Saigon. The North Vietnamese 9th Division is swinging around the southern flank of the 25th to threaten Saigon's western perimeter. Southwest of the capital, the North Vietnamese have moved additional forces up from the delta to challenge the main defenses of Long An Province directly, and other communist regiments are sweeping north of this action to approach the southwestern outskirts of Saigon.

The communists are also moving five sapper regiments into the Saigon area to disrupt government control, terrorize the population, and guide North Vietnamese regulars into the metropolitan area.

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Saigon no longer has any reserve forces available to help defend the city. The Joint General Staff does not consider it practical to attempt to bring any of its units deep in the delta closer to Saigon.

Communist forces have taken Phan Thiet and Ham Tan, and are continuing their drive down the coast toward Vung Tau. They will probably capture that lightly defended port within a few days.

* * * *

The communists appear to be ruling out any consideration of a genuine negotiated settlement of the conflict. At a press conference in Saigon Saturday, the Viet Cong's spokesman carefully avoided mention of negotiations with the present government or even a reconstituted one such as they had been demanding. Instead, he reiterated the Viet Cong's position of March 21 which called for the overthrow of Thieu and the immediate suspension of all US support as the only two preconditions which could bring about a "rapid settlement."

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On the government side, however, President Thieu still shows every sign of intending to stay in office.

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Despite Thieu's tough public stand, South Vietnamese opposition elements apparently are still trying to work behind the scenes to form a new government that could lead to negotiations with the communists. Catholic opposition leader Tran Huu Thanh, retired general Duong Van "Big" Minh, former Senate chairman Nguyen Van Huyen, and Buddhist opposition leader Senator Vu Van Mau plan to issue a joint proclamation on April 23 demanding the immediate resignation of President Thieu and calling for the formation of a "national leadership council." The new council would be headed by the same four leaders with a cabinet composed two thirds of "rightists"--presumably military officers and others closely identified with the present government--and one third of "leftists"--presumably elements represented by the four opposition leaders.

The hazy plan of action for the proposed new government appears to consist of immediate negotiations with the communists and establishment of the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord called for in the Paris Accords. Under the opposition scenario, the "leftist" faction of the government would concentrate on political competition with the communists within the Council, while the "rightist" faction would attempt to stabilize the military situation in what remains of South Vietnam's territory.

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LATIN AMERICA

Secretary Kissinger's trip to the region this week and the OAS General Assembly meetings next month are focusing Latin American attention again on the state of inter-American affairs. At the same time, events in Indochina have provided a peg for a new round of Latin commentary on broad aspects of US policy.

While attitudes range from close identification with the US to antipathy, a common thread among the Latins is discomfort over the need to adjust to a new US view of the world. US positions on a variety of international topics have been interpreted as tougher toward the non-aligned and less benevolent toward friendly governments. A few Latin governments, including Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil, harbor some hope that reverses in Asia will turn US attention closer to home. Most seem to fear that current problems in the Far East will make Washington less flexible in other areas.

In Brazil, some officials are expressing apprehension over the reliability of the US as an ally. Thus, government leaders will be particularly interested in exploring with Secretary Kissinger how events in Southeast Asia will affect Brazil's close relationship with the US.

Concern over reverberations from Indochina is highest in Latin countries that feel themselves embattled in an anticommunist struggle. Chile, for example, feels increasingly isolated in its effort to eliminate Allende's Marxist influence there. Events in Indochina, taken together with the removal of Santiago from Secretary Kissinger's itinerary, have lowered US prestige and made Chile feel that its best option is to strengthen ties with neighbors in Latin America.

Uruguayans question the value of their long loyalty to and cooperation with the US when the Secretary of State plans to visit Buenos Aires, capital of an ostensibly nonaligned government, but not Montevideo. They view detente as an unwise accommodation to the communists and deplore Washington's change of heart about Cuba and Indochina.

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Panama's unique relationship with the US has raised grave fear over the political fallout from the Indochina situation. Panamanians speculate that US public opinion, weary of setbacks, will not tolerate yielding the Canal Zone to Panama.

Elsewhere in the hemisphere, US attention to Asia has fortified the view that Latin America continues to have very low priority in US thinking. Few seem to expect that Secretary Kissinger's travels to Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela or the OAS meetings will restore the sense of rejuvenation that permeated inter-American events last spring. That enthusiasm has withered with the successive failures to find common ground on numerous economic issues, with the abortive effort to end sanctions against Cuba, with official revelations about US actions in Chile, and with growing discord in international forums between the US and the less developed world.

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CAMBODIA

There is little firm information available regarding the fate of journalists and other foreigners in Phnom Penh.

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[redacted] Press accounts of a Khmer communist broadcast referring to the beheading of senior government leaders in Phnom Penh have not been confirmed.

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USSR

The failure of the Central Committee plenum of April 16 to fill the vacant post of party secretary for propaganda and culture indicates that the unsettled atmosphere in cultural affairs evident during the past several months is persisting. As a result of candidate Politburo member Petr Demichev's appointment to the government post of minister of culture, he was relieved of his long-time responsibilities for culture on the party secretariat at a Central Committee plenum last December.

When the leadership failed at that time to name a successor to the party post, there were signs of indecision--and possibly even deadlock--not only on whom to choose, but also on the future course of cultural policy in an era of detente. Now that another plenum has passed without dealing with these problems, it is likely that cultural policy and the selection of Demichev's successor will become a part of the political maneuvering within the party hierarchy in advance of the CPSU congress scheduled for February 1976.

So far, the leadership's stopgap solution has been to parcel out Demichev's former secretariat responsibilities among several incumbent secretaries, and also to act collectively at times when the intervention of the party secretary for culture is normally called for. In terms of policy, a pragmatic carrot-and-stick approach has been evident in some sectors and immobility and drift in others. The public drumbeat on cultural issues, however, has tended toward a reiteration of generally hard, doctrinaire positions.

The latest example of collective responsibility in cultural affairs and of public policy orthodoxy was the joint meeting in Moscow of Soviet "creative" unions on April 15. It was attended by seven of the nine party secretaries--only Brezhnev and party secretary for agriculture Kulakov were absent. Although Demichev, who also attended the meeting, was legitimately present in

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his capacity as minister of culture and candidate Politburo member, he was nevertheless conspicuous as the only leader present who was not also a party secretary. This may strengthen speculation among some Soviet intellectuals that the vacuum in the party's cultural post has enabled Demichev to exercise more of a say in cultural affairs than is customary for a minister of culture.

The joint meeting of the cultural unions, devoted to preparations for the 30th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, took the opportunity to restate the commitment of the Soviet cultural establishment to the party and its program by "praising the heroism of the Soviet people during the war and philosophically assessing its result." The main speaker, head of the writers' union board Georgy Markov, never strayed from standard, orthodox positions. None of the party leaders present delivered a speech.

Markov, who is also a full member of the Central Committee, was among the speakers at the CPSU plenum the following day. None of the speeches at the plenum has been published, but Markov's role evidently was to reassure the political leadership that present controls over culture are adequate to maintain the status quo, at least until the leadership decides on where to go from here.

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ISRAEL

Prime Minister Rabin focused on the state of US-Israeli relations in a lengthy interview published Friday in Israel's largest daily. His remarks were apparently intended for Washington as well as for his domestic audience.

Rabin was plainly attempting to calm widespread fears in Israel that relations with the US have dangerously deteriorated in the wake of the suspension of indirect talks with Egypt last month. He also served notice on the US that Tel Aviv believes there is little hope for further progress in negotiations with the Arabs until the "rough edges" in bilateral relations have been smoothed over.

Rabin said that Foreign Minister Allon will try to obtain from Secretary Kissinger during their meeting today a reading on the implications for Israel of Washington's policy reassessment.

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Rabin again denied, as he did in his speech on April 16 commemorating Israel's 27th anniversary, that the problem with the US was more than one of a difference of opinion. He urged Israelis to remain sensible and calm in dealing with it.

Defense Minister Peres, however, has openly labeled US-Israeli relations as in a state of "crisis." Rabin too, despite his public efforts to play down the matter, is worried. This is reflected in his candid outline of a two-pronged government effort to improve Israel's position in the US. The first task, which he deemed of "utmost" importance, is to conduct a detailed and full-fledged information campaign in the US to convince the American people that last month's indirect talks with Egypt broke off as a result of Egyptian inflexibility, despite Israeli willingness to compromise.

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The other part of the effort, Rabin said, is directed at prominent members of the US administration and the Congress. Israel, he continued, must confront them over the content and position of the US in "every sphere" of Washington's relations with Israel, while displaying a firm stand of its own. This stand, he said, will have a "decisive" influence on determining the outcome of Washington's policy reassessment.

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USSR-SOMALIA

Although the power struggle in Somalia last month resulted in the "confinement" of several pro-Soviet figures, including Defense Minister Samantar, the upshot seems to be that the Soviets are still firmly entrenched and Samantar is back on the job.

Speaking at the Somali army's 15th anniversary festivities last week, Samantar blasted "Western propaganda" that implied Somalia is a Soviet satellite. The ceremony had some of the trappings common in Eastern Europe; behind the dais a portrait of General Secretary Brezhnev was given equal prominence with President Siad's likeness.

Moreover, the organizers managed to leave Yugoslav diplomats off the guest list. There probably was a Soviet hand behind this omission, although the Yugoslavs are in trouble with the Somalis because of signs that they are selling arms to Ethiopia.

The Soviets are not counting solely on Siad or Samantar to maintain their assets in Somalia. They have large numbers of advisers throughout the bureaucracy, including the army and security service.

Siad appears to be content to go along with the Soviets, having decided for now that the Soviet presence is beneficial. In addition to becoming Somalia's major source of arms, the USSR:

--is building a large airfield near Mogadiscio;

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CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The limits of Prague's toleration of dissidence will probably be spelled out this week at a plenum of the party's Central Committee.

In the speech on Wednesday, in which he condemned Alexander Dubcek, party boss Husak announced that the Central Committee will "examine certain proposals in the sphere of social policy" that will constitute an "important step for a great section of the population."

Minister of Interior Obzina, in a speech the next day, picked up Husak's lead and warned that the security forces would do everything "immediately and resolutely" to suppress illegal activities of domestic reactionary groups and individuals, although without using the police as a "tool of repression against the people as a whole." These remarks buttress Husak's warning that some dissidents had mistakenly interpreted his avoidance of "administrative methods"--arrests and executions--as weakness.

The leadership has been debating the highly controversial question of how to deal with the 1968 reformers--and particularly Dubcek--ever since Husak came to power six years ago. The debate has sharpened considerably over the past six months, however, and Husak's attack on Dubcek, after Dubcek's letter of last fall calling for a return to the rule of law was published recently in the West, suggests that hardliners in the party are asserting themselves.

This week's plenum, plus Dubcek's reaction to Husak's condemnation, will set the stage for action in Prague. Should Dubcek run true to form, he will refuse to go into exile; Husak has now drawn the line, and any retreat from his stand will risk deepening the divisions in the party.

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FINLAND

Finnish political observers now expect the current four-party coalition government to resign in early May, paving the way for an election on August 17-18.

The Social Democrats and the Center Party--the major coalition partners--have set up a ministerial group in a last-minute effort to resolve persistent disagreements. In letters to leaders that were subsequently leaked to the press, President Kekkonen threatened earlier this month to dissolve parliament if coalition differences were not composed.

Neither partner appears willing to make the necessary concessions, in part because opinion polls suggest both would improve their standing in parliament through a new election. The Social Democrats do not relish an election in the vacation season, but are said to be only going through the motions of negotiating and to be resigned to the fall of the government.

Observers assume that Kekkonen will turn to Helsinki Mayor Aura to form a nonpolitical administration until a new coalition can be hammered out after the election. Aura, who led similar teams in 1970 and 1971-72, may therefore be in office when Finland hosts the European security conference's concluding summit meeting, which could take place in mid-summer.

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CHINA - NORTH KOREA

Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping's speech at the welcoming banquet for North Korean President Kim Il-song last Friday in Peking reflects the cautious approach the Chinese are currently taking toward problems on the Korean peninsula.

Although Teng took a pro forma swipe at the US for "clinging to a two Koreas policy" and for failing to withdraw its troops from South Korea, his emphasis was strongly on "peaceful reunification" of the two Koreas. Teng referred three times to Chinese support for the "correct policy" of peaceful reunification, a policy he claimed had originated in Pyongyang.

Kim was predictably harsher than Teng in describing the Korean situation, but did not go beyond his own previous pronouncements. He implied that either a war instigated by the South or a revolution there would result if US forces and the Pak government remained, and declared that Pyongyang would "not stand idly by" in either event. He guaranteed a durable peace and subsequent reunification by peaceful means if US forces withdrew and Pak were replaced. Kim concluded that "everything" depended on the US attitude.

Both Teng and Kim praised Prince Sihanouk's role in the Cambodian people's struggle for "liberation." They also singled out Sihanouk, whose presence at the banquet was featured, for post-speech toasts. Coupled with the absence of any reference to other Cambodian insurgent leaders, this suggests that both Peking and Pyongyang are solidly in favor of an important role for Sihanouk in the new Cambodian government.

Kim continues to receive an extremely warm and high-level welcome in Peking. In addition to his meeting Friday with Mao, he has also met once with Premier Chou En-lai and twice with Teng.

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THAILAND - NORTH KOREA

The Khukrit Pramot government has agreed to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea.

The decision, which comes at Pyongyang's initiative, is the first concrete step by the new government to improve relations with Asian communist regimes. The two countries have exchanged sports teams and trade delegations in recent months.

Indeed, the decision was a relatively easy one; while the Thai are deeply suspicious of the intentions of Hanoi and Peking in Southeast Asia, they do not view Pyongyang as a potential threat to their security.

Pyongyang views relations with Bangkok as another step forward in its diplomatic competition with Seoul and as beneficial to Pyongyang's side of the Korean question at the UN. Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, North Korea established relations with Malaysia in 1973 and with Australia last year; it has maintained ties with Indonesia since the Sukarno era.

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